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Near drowning off south pier raises concerns about jumpers

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Tribune photo/Kyle Moroney
Grand Haven Department of Safety Officer Michael Grillo and LT. Rick Yonker talk with 15-year-old Danielle Barret at the Coast Guard station after Tuesday's near-drowning incident at the state park's south pier-head. Barret had been jumping with two other Muskegon area residents, one of whom is in critical condition at Spectrum's DeVos Children's Hospital in Grand Rapids.

By Kyle Moroney
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Not many people realize the risk they take when jumping off a pier. But three Muskegon-area people who were jumping off the south pier head at the Grand Haven State Park early Tuesday afternoon had to be rescued from Lake Michigan when they had trouble swimming in the choppy waves and undertow.

At about 12:20 p.m., Ottawa County Central Dispatch and the U.S. Coast

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Guard Group Grand Haven received a call stating that three people were jumping off the south pier near shore, and one was calling for help, Ottawa County Sheriff's Lt. Steve Kempker said.

Kempker said that when the Coast Guard arrived at the scene, one of the jumpers, 17-year-old Scott Allen Smith of Norton Shores, was being held in the water by another jumper, 25-year-old Gerrit Andrus of Muskegon, and several bystanders. Upon the Coast Guard's arrival, Smith was unresponsive and not breathing.

Smith and Andrus had been jumping into the water and were approximately 30 feet from the pier when they became fatigued and were unable to reach the pier due to the waves and undertow, Kempker said.

Montague resident Danielle Barret, 15, jumped into the water with an innertube to help Smith, Grand Haven Department of Public Safety Lt. Brad Risher said.

Risher said it is unknown at this time whether Barret was jumping off the pier with Smith and Andrus.

GHDPS officers dove in the water and pulled Andrus and Barret out of the water, Risher said.

Once Smith was taken out of the water by the Coast Guard, they performed CPR on him and brought him to shore. Smith was transferred to North Ottawa Community Hospital by their paramedics. He remained stabilized at NOCH, but was later flown to Spectrum Health Hospital in Grand Rapids by AeroMed helicopter, Kempker said.

Andrus and Barret were treated and released from NOCH. Spectrum Hospital officials this morning said Smith is in critical condition at DeVos Children's Hospital.

Grand Haven resident Barb Jerovsek, 57, was at the pier doing her daily run when she saw what was happening.

"There were already people trying to help pull (Smith) out of the water, and when I got there, I could see that he was unconscious," Jerovsek said. "We couldn't get to him from the pier, so I didn't know what to do but take off my shoes and jump in."

Before the Coast Guard arrived, Smith was being held up by the innertube, but Jerovsek was afraid he might fall off from the crashing waves, she said.

"It was a yellow flag day, and there were high waves that kept pushing into the pier," Jerovsek said. "The innertube was upright, and I thought he could possibly fall off."

While in the water near Smith, Jerovsek said she was able to get a couple breaths into his nose and when the Coast Guard came, she held Smith's arm up so the Coast Guard could reach him and pull him out of the water.

"He started slipping as he was getting on the Coast Guard boat, and I held his arm up out of the water until the Coast Guard said they had him and pulled him out of the water," she said. "I wish I were there sooner. People are proud of me. I didn't think I could do that -- but you have to do what you have to (to help). It makes me feel good."

Tuesday's near-drowning raised concerns about the safety of pier jumping.

"That is a prohibited activity according to our rules and regulations," Army Corps of Engineers Office Chief David Foster said. "We rely on our local law

enforcement agencies to enforce that."

"Those structures, piers and sea walls, are designed for only navigation. They are not designed for any other purpose," Foster said. "We operate and maintain the navigational structures for the purpose of navigation. We own the structures, but not the land its on -- that is owned by the state of Michigan."

"What's more dangerous than losing your life?" Foster asked. "I don't think there's anything more dangerous than that."

It is uncertain where enforcement responsibility for pier jumping lies.

"Historically, we have not taken any enforcement actions on pier jumping because it's owned by the Army Corps of Engineers," Risher said. "We're looking into see what kind of enforcement can be taken at the pier."

Coast Guard Lt. Rebecca Heatherington said there were one to two-foot waves with winds of five to 10 knots Tuesday afternoon in the area where the jumpers were jumping.

"It's dangerous to be jumping off the pier in any condition. You can't see the bottom of the water, there are rocks, lifeguards are not on duty, and you're outside the normal swimming zone where there is boating traffic," she said, noting that the currents drive the waves and could pull someone "out to sea."

"It's just not safe," she said.

Heatherington forewarns anyone who takes that risk of jumping off a pier into a large lake, such as Lake Michigan.

"Jumping off the pier into a lake is not like jumping into a pool from a diving board," she said. "You don't have the wind pressure, waves and there is (generally) a lifeguard on duty at a pool."

Heatherington said Tuesday's water conditions were moderate to difficult for a good swimmer, and become even more difficult for someone who becomes fatigued.

The sheriff's department marine patrol also assisted at the scene. The dive team was initially called out to the pier; however, was later called off when rescue units arrived at the scene.

Kempker said the incident remains under investigation.

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